



The Pucker

By Lt. Matt D. Menza

Aviators often relearn the lessons of those who came before them through their own experiences. This experience often comes with a high level of pucker factor, solidifying these lessons for a lifetime. I never really understood the true meaning of pucker factor, until I began operating around the boat.

As a Prowler FRS student pilot with 50 hours in type, I was learning to listen to my elders, who often ended briefs by telling me to check this or that before the cat shot. My second CQ, catapult shot at night would forever teach me to listen to those side notes and pieces of wisdom, passed down from more experienced aviators. Sure, I knew the procedures, but I didn't always remember the, "Oh, by the ways." They seemed less important than my emergency procedures or boat procedures.

On the second night of CQ, we smoothly set up in the catapult, and the shooter signaled us into tension. I went to military power and began checking my gauges. All tapes, hydraulics and oil looked good—no warning or caution lights, feet off the brakes, I gave the other crew mem-

bers a final vote; they were ready. I turned on our external lights to signal to the catapult shooters we were ready to be shot off into the night. About three seconds later, our 56,000-pound jet was accelerating from zero to 140 knots in less than 300 feet. At the end of the stroke, I called, "Good motors and tapes, gear coming up," and I felt something hit my control stick. Despite this, I concentrated on my instruments and tried to fly away from the water.

I over-rotated a few degrees off the cat, and we were climbing too steeply to accelerate. I tried pushing the stick forward, but it would not move. I shifted my scan to the base of my stick where I saw the radar-screen filter laying snugly between the radar display and the control stick. The pucker factor reached a new level for me.

As I felt my seat cushion slowly being sucked into my bowels, I came up with a quick plan. I had to keep the stick forward to prevent the 7-inch diameter, quarter-inch thick, piece of glass from slipping down into the controls and out of my reach. I also had to take my scan off

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the instruments and reach my stubby little arms down, forward of the stick, to retrieve the large piece of FOD. I needed to pull back on the stick, and, at the same moment, grab the screen before it could drop deeper. This would require a slightly more nose-up attitude, which already was causing anxiety among the other crew members.

At 155 knots and 16-units nose up, with no acceleration, passing 600 feet, it was time to move. I executed my plan and grabbed the screen without dropping it. I quickly jabbed it into my rightseater's lap and said, "FOD, don't let go."

He calmly took it and said, "Roger."

Finally, I could push the nose over and accelerate up to the flap-retraction speed of 185 knots. I further accelerated to a safe and low-pucker-factor speed of 250 knots. After the night CQ, I thought about the words of my IPs who, on more than one occasion had said, "Oh, by the way, tug and pull and check all your screens and gauges before the cat shot in case something is loose." Apparently, the screen was missing a setscrew, and I might have noticed it was loose with a little tug. One more trick of the trade to put in my bag of tricks. 🦅

Lt. Menza was with VAQ-129 at the time of this incident and currently flies with VAQ-140.